



Demystifying the Student Visa Process

SALLY IRONFIELD, the non-immigrant visa chief at the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi, discussed procedures for applying for student visas in a Web chat on June 13, assuring Indian students that it's not too late to apply if they want to study at American universities this fall. Students may apply for a visa 120 days before the start of their studies. Because less time than that remains, Ironfield said her office was accommodating all requests for student visa interviews, usually within three weeks. Most applications from India are approved.



B.S. BINOY

SALLY IRONFIELD: Let me start out by saying that we're very happy to see that there's been an increase in student visa applications this year, and we hope to surpass last year's total of 18,000 student visa applicants processed.

How does India rank in terms of numbers of student visas issued annually?

India sends the largest number of students to study in the United States worldwide. There are currently 80,000 Indian students studying in the United States. There are a lot of master's and doctoral candidates applying for visas, and this year we have a sharp increase in applicants wishing to pursue undergraduate studies.

How much money can I carry in the United States? Will I get a part-time job? If I have specialized in a particular field and want to earn some money, can I do so?

What types of questions are asked at

the time of the visa approval?

Students generally are not eligible for employment the first year they are studying in the United States. However, there are opportunities to pursue on-campus employment and other types of employment upon approval of the school's administration. All applicants for a non-immigrant visa must establish that they have strong ties outside the United States that the interviewing officer believes would lead the applicant to depart the United States. During an interview, the officer considers the general overall status of an applicant, and does not make a decision based on any one factor. They consider and will ask questions about family, employment, longevity of work history, income, travel history and purpose of traveling to the United States.

I am an MBBS graduate and I want to know about further study options there.

You should contact the U.S.

Educational Foundation in India (USEFI) for more information at <http://fulbright-india.org/>

Is there any possibility of the number of student visas for India being raised?

There is no congressionally mandated limit for issuance of student visas. Possibilities are limitless. Sponsoring schools register with the Department of State and are then authorized to issue I-20 forms for international students. We are committed to giving every student an opportunity to apply in time to report to their selected school.

What is the ideal time to apply for a visa? What are the documents one should be prepared with?

The good time to apply for a student visa is as early as possible, usually once you've received your I-20. You can arrange an interview up to 120 days before the start date on your I-20, and you can enter the United States 30 days prior

- ✓ Pay application (currently Rs. 4,600) and VFS (Visa Facilitation Service) appointment and courier delivery system fees (currently Rs. 276) at a designated HDFC Bank.
- ✓ Schedule an appointment and complete application forms at <http://www.vfs-usa.co.in/>. You will need the HDFC Bank receipt in order to schedule the appointment.
- ✓ You must have received from the school a document called an I-20.

This document also requires a payment for the SEVIS (Student and Exchange Visitor Information System) registration system. The school may have made this payment for you, and will send you confirmation information, which will be necessary to present at the interview.

- ✓ Questions on SEVIS payments should be directed back to the school or answers may be found at <http://www.fmjfee.com/>

to the commencement of classes.

What is the approximate time we are allowed to stay in the United States after getting our visa?

You normally are permitted to stay until 30 days after the completion of your studies, provided you remain a full-time student.

What is the normal duration of a visa interview?

Each visa interview lasts only a few minutes, because what you write on your application, combined with the I-20, provides most of the information needed for an officer to make a decision.

May I know how much money will be required for being eligible for a visa?

The I-20 indicates how much money is needed and who the school believes is financing the education, whether it is personal, family or school funds. The applicant needs to demonstrate that there are sufficient funds available for the first year of study, and that he or she has resources that can cover the remaining years of study.

What if the I-20 itself states that the student is getting full financial aid? In that case, are we supposed to show our personal funds?

No. But as part of the applicant's qualifications, he needs to demonstrate that he has strong ties outside the United States, and the financial status of the applicant and/or their family may factor into the interview.

What are the documents required for the visa interview?

Besides the documents already mentioned, the application and the I-20, the consular officer may ask you for your

mark sheets, degree, GRE, SAT and TOEFL scores. Depending upon who's paying, they could also ask for the financial status of the individual financing your studies. For more information, I suggest you visit the visas section of our Web site: <http://newdelhi.usembassy.gov/>

What are the probable reasons for rejection of a student visa?

On occasion, a student may not receive a visa because the student is unable to convince the officer that he or she is a credible student, or he/she is unable to finance the studies, or does not have a credible plan to return to India. Bringing documentation is helpful, but cannot take the place of an interview with the officer. The applicant needs to be able to discuss his or her eligibilities clearly during the interview.

What are the convincing indicators that the student will come back after studies and maybe a short work experience?

The best way is to have a credible plan for return that the applicant can explain to the interviewing officer in just a few sentences. Prior to the boom in the technology industry here, many Indian graduates remained in the United States after their studies, adjusting their visa status to H-1B. Now we have seen an increasing number of students returning to India to join high-tech firms or establish their own companies. We are confident that the India of today will continue to attract the return of its graduates. Working in the United States on an H-1B visa further enhances their marketability in India.

By putting so much emphasis on the financial strength of a candidate, can

you do justice to deserving students from India's educated but not so rich families?

If a deserving student can demonstrate that there are sufficient funds—be they family funds, scholarships, bank loans, etc.—to pay for their studies, there is no bar to eligibility due to the student's financial situation.

So what if I had a student visa and then I graduate? I want to get a job in the United States. Do I have to change visas? Do I have to come back to India to get a new visa?

Probably yes, but I suggest you visit the Department of Homeland Security's Web site for more information about adjusting status while in the United States: <http://uscis.gov/> □

USEFUL WEB SITES

The State Department's Education USA:
<http://www.educationusa.state.gov/usvisa.htm>
 U.S. Educational Foundation in India:
<http://fulbright-india.org/>
 U.S. Embassy:
<http://newdelhi.usembassy.gov>
 Bureau of Consular Affairs:
<http://travel.state.gov/>
 Visa Facilitation Service:
<http://www.vfs-usa.co.in/>
 Department of Homeland Security/Immigration and Customs Enforcement:
<http://www.ice.gov/graphics/sevis>
 SEVIS: <http://www.fmjfee.com/>
 For questions about a specific visa case, e-mail nivnd@state.gov